

A few notes on the "Anyam Gila" Basket Making at Tanjong Kling, Malacca.

BY MRS. BLAND

Once upon a time there was a goblin named Sang Kelembai. He lived long ago and it was in his time that men-folk began to appear in the world. When he saw how they caught the beasts both wild and tame, and made them do all sorts of work, and how they even made the wind drive their boats on the sea, he began to get alarmed lest he, too, should be caught. So one day he went down to the sea-shore and assembled all manner of beasts—the jungle people, and spoke to them "O, all living things, come away with me over the sea to the sky's edge. This is no place for us. See how mankind is catching all the beasts and making them work." But, said the Beasts, "Why should we go so far? What will we do over there?" Said the Buffalo: "if the men catch me, I will kill them with my horns." Said the Horse: "if the men catch me, I will slay them with my heels and teeth." So spoke all the Beasts, each boasting of his own weapons, for indeed they had no wish to go so far as the sky's edge. These replies troubled the mind of Sang Kelembai so he took all his possessions, his fishing nets and his rombong baskets, and having burnt them to ashes, he departed alone to the sky's edge. Soon after the human folk came down to the sea beach and there they found the ashes and the remains of the nets and rombongs. They carefully examined the meshes of the nets and the weaving of the basket work and tried to copy them. One of the women went home to her daughters and said "Let us get some pandan leaves, and split them and then dry them." They did this and in the night came the rain and soaked the leaves, and next day the sun shone and

bleached them. Then they tried to weave them like the goblin's baskets, but their efforts were in vain. Day after day they tried but could not succeed. At last a fairy in the guise of a woman came by. She saw the women sitting distracted in the house and said to them.

"Oh ye who sit within the house distracted,"

"Striving to learn the craft of Sang Kelembai,"

"Come ye while I the daughter of the fairies,"

"Teach you to weave the web of the distracted."

"So the Fairy taught them to find the long mengkuang leaves, to split them, to dry them, to supple them, to bleach them." Everything she taught them, and when the baskets were finished with their ornaments, she said "Now you understand the Distracted Weaving, and why it is called so. You work at it till your eyes are dim and your brain reels, till the back aches, and the hands grow weary, but still it does not come right."

This ancient industry exists to the present day amongst the Malay women at Tanjong Kling in Malacca. The baskets are woven of mengkuang, which grows there in great quantities. This mengkuang is a screw-pine or Pandanus (*Pandanus fascicularis*) and there are many other species also used by the Malays for weaving mats and coarse baskets and known by them as Pandan, but the particular screw-pine used at Tanjong Kling is called mengkuang. It is very supple and therefore suited to the special weaving done at Tanjong Kling. The latter is of a very distinctive and uncommon character and is called the "Anyam Gila," or mad weaving. It is very intricate to learn and quite calculated to drive a beginner mad. The mengkuang requires a good deal of preparation before it is fit for use, and the old women are generally employed in this work. They cut the long prickly leaves down with a native knife, or parang, (plate 4. fig A) and carry it home in large bundles on their heads. Then they dry or "lavor" it slightly over a fire of sticks, and cut off the thorns which grow down the spine of the leaf. This divides the leaf into two wide strips and for this purpose they use a smaller knife

(pisau) than the parang (Pl. 4. fig B). Next they "janka" or divide, the half leaves into strips by means of a rude implement called a "janka" (Pl. 4. fig C). The "janka" is a flat piece of wood with brass spikes fixed into one end at regular intervals, the intervals being decided by the width of strand required (the widths vary from one inch to one eighth of an inch). In this process the thorny edges of the leaves are disposed of, and many are the scratches and wounds inflicted on the workers. The thorns of the mengkuang point upwards on the edges of the leaves and downwards on the spine so one can easily imagine they are difficult to avoid in handling the leaves. Now the green strands are ready as far as size goes, but they leave yet to be made supple and smooth or "lurut." The implement for this process is the "Pulurut" or a piece of hollowed bamboo, which is pulled over the leaf many times by the left hand with a sort of curling movement (Pl. 4. fig. D). The leaves are now folded into compact bundles and soaked in a bowl of cold water (pasoh rendam) for three nights, changing the water twice a day. After this they are laid in the sun and bleached for a day, and woe betide the mengkuang if it gets a drenching by mistake: It would then all go black instead of the pretty greeny grey white, which is desired. The mengkuang is now ready for use. The construction of the baskets or "rombongs" is complicated, and much more tedious than many people imagine. It starts from a star of six strands called by the Malays "Pusat Belanak" or the navel of the "Belanak" fish, a species of mullet. This produces twelve strands, for the weaving is done with both ends of every strand used. It is this that makes the describing of the work so very difficult. The whole basket is built up by the continual interweaving and crossing of the inner and outer strands, and there is no foundation of warps round which to weave, as in English baskets. It is built up continuously round and round by weaving as in knitting a stocking. The last strand in a round is called by the Malay the "mati." The basket is begun in the centre by a star of six strands. To this is next added six more strands, then round these are woven in twelve more, then twelve more and soon till the size required

is achieved (plate 1). A six-sided shape is thus produced. The added strands are woven in always two at each corner, "buku" or "susoh" as Malays term it, and the full "mata gila" or mad stitch is achieved after the second round. The strands that go from left to right from the weaving strand or "daun anyam." The weaving strands over and under which the other strands are pulled and folded are also used for determining the size of the basket. How many "matas" or stitches? the Malays will say when you order a basket. The "daun selang" or crossing strand, and the "daun betul" or warp strand are the only other names possible to mark the distinctive action in the "Anyam Gila." When the size is determined on and woven, a piece of split rattan is inserted and the sides of the basket next made, and in the weaving the rattan is completely hidden. The strands of the mengkuang are glossy on one side only, so the Malays by carefully turning their work, arrange that the basket should be glossy both inside and out. The sides are woven round without any adding and it is a relief to the weary worker when this stage is achieved. The Malays, of course, work sitting on the floor (plate 2) and complain of the fatigue they endure—pains in the back and nape of the neck. I can testify to all this inconvenience for when learning I tried every position to obtain ease but in vain. The height achieved, another rattan is inserted. This rattan is covered with a strip of mengkuang, which process is called "bubor" or "Susop" mengkuang. In plate 2, a basket ready for this second rattan is shown by the side of the worker. It resembles a cutlet frill at this stage. Then the strands are all worked back again, the glossy sides being now towards the worker. This is a tedious process and called by the Malays to "sesep" or insert. They use an implement of wood and brass called the "penysep" or inserter which resembles very much the prickers used by the American Indians in their basketry (pl. 4 fig E). It is often strengthened and ornamented by European treasures, such as a brass thimble and an empty cartridge case and in the very coarse work I have seen used a clumsy "penysep" made entirely of wood. The strands are slipped over their respective duplicates till the

bottom centre of the basket is reached when they cross each other for strength and are cut off invisibly. On the way the pretty designs are made by twisting the strands between thumb and forefinger. This produces a raised ornamental twist which is very attractive. The ornamentation is done by twisting the strands, and starts from a single stitches called "Bras Goring," or rice grains, and a star of six such stitches called "Bunga Tanjong" flower of *Mimusops lengi* and a hexagon built round the "Bunga Tanjong" called the "Bunga Kuntum," or flower bud. These simple patterns are worked into large and small triangles and diamonds called "puchok rebong" or bamboo shoots, or "potong baji" or wedges. Combinations of triangles are called "puchok rebong berantai" or festoons of bamboo shoots, and "bunga tiga bersegi berantai" or festoons of 3 sided ornaments. The edging round all the baskets is called "bunga pending," or belt (Pl. 5). The lids are made in a similar manner of the same number of strands as the bottoms only woven slightly more loosely. The women make and sell their baskets in nests or "susun" of five baskets, each basket fitting into another very nearly (Pl. 3). There should only be the difference of two strands between each size. The baskets are made in various shapes and forms—square, long, oval, triangular, and diamond-shaped (Pl. 3 and 5). All are built up in the same way, starting with a six sided basket but with added strands to bring to any other required shape. This is an art by itself and many who can make hexagonal baskets cannot make other shapes, therefore the hexagonal are the cheapest; 50 cents extra being asked for the fancy shapes. The long and the square are the most difficult. They also make a basket of tiers, one on top of another, the lid of the lower basket making also the bottom of the next, and so on. This they call a "tengkat" and it is now almost a lost art. Another fancy shape is the "tudong gelok" (a pointed-shaped cover). They also make very coarse, large ornamented baskets which are much bought by Europeans for carrying clothes (plate 3). The women who make these live at Tanjong Kling, but all in a separate quarter of the kampong from the finer workers. It takes them a month to make a nest of very

ordinary weaving, while a fine nest takes from three to four months to complete and this means daily steady work. For the ordinary hexagonal nests they earn from \$2.50 to \$3.00. and for a fine one from \$4.00 to \$5.00. When this is calculated out it cannot be said that the industry is overpaid, yet there are many who think that it is, and that, in spite of the increased cost of living. There are now about forty or fifty experienced basket workers living at Tanjong Kling besides many beginners. Formerly only ten women made baskets. The demand has greatly increased, for people have begun to order the baskets in great quantities for home bazaars, where they are much appreciated. The industry in a way is suffering as the women are making more carelessly and rapidly to meet the demand. Five old women come into the town every second day in order to sell the work of the village, they are old and more or less blind and now unable to weave themselves. They walk fourteen miles to sell the work of their younger sisters. The chief distinctive feature in the Tanjong Kling weaving is that they use no dyes and also *always* ornament their "mata gila" with raised designs (Pl.3). In Province Wellesley the same weaving exists, but in a smaller degree, and there few ornamental designs are made and no rattans are inserted. I believe along the Malacca Coast the "Anyam Gila" may be found at Tanjong Bidara and also Kuala Linggi. I have also seen baskets and tobacco-pouches of this weaving obtained from Sumatra, Kelantan, Perak, Kedda, and Siamese territory in the Malay Peninsula. Some of the specimens were extremely fine, finer than any Malacca work now obtainable—and ornamented with dyed strands, sequins, and gold filagree work.

I have confined myself in this paper solely to this one style of weaving the mad stitch, but hope later to send further notes on other and more simple forms of basket weaving practised in Malacca. It is very curious that the ornamented "Anyam Gila" should be confined to Tanjong Kling only in Malacca, and any light that can be thrown on its origin and history would be very interesting. The female prisoners in the Singapore Gaol are made to learn "Anyam Gila" and a better

punishment could hardly be devised. It has reduced many to tears. It was started under the auspices of the late Mr. O'Sullivan who happened to have amongst his prisoners a Province Wellesley basket-maker. With the help of Mrs. Hansen, the Matron, the industry has been firmly established there, and it is owing to her assistance also that I have been enabled to master the details of the industry and to make a basket myself. Native teachers are hopelessly poor and Mrs. Hansen deserves great credit for the way in which she has excelled in this difficult art. She has evolved a very pretty fan at Mr. Bland's suggestion in the "Anyam Gila" which is sold for the ridiculous sum of 75 cents at the gaol (Pl. 3). She has introduced many new designs for ornamenting the fans but the small and constantly changing number of prisoners renders the supply very limited and uncertain.

EXPLANATION OF PLATES.

- Plate 1. Specimens illustrating the commencement of the "Anyam Gila" plait. (See text.)
- Plate 2. Malay basket maker.
- Plate 3. Specimens of Malacca baskets. In left hand lower corner is shown a "Susun," or set of 5 baskets; next to this is a basket made in Sarawak with coloured strands in it; next on the right is a "tengkat," or a basket in tiers; next to this is a fancy-shaped basket called "tudong gëlok;" and on the extreme right is a large coarsely woven basket used by Europeans for holding clothes. In the top left hand corner is shown part of a fan made by the prisoners in Singapore Gaol. Next to this is a representation in "Anyam Gila" of a pineapple. The other baskets depicted show the various shapes that are made.
- Plate 4. The instruments used by basket makers a. *parang*, b. *pisau*, c. *jangka*, d. *pulurut*, e. *penysep*. (a to b. $x \frac{1}{4}$ c to e $x \frac{1}{2}$).
- Plate 5. Diagrams illustrating development of shapes from the hexagonal basket, and ornamentation.

